

The Enlightenment Project in the Arab World: Saudi Arabia as a Case Study in Modern Islamic Thought

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Abstract : It is noticed that many Arab intellectuals have called to the need and the importance of enlightenment and its application in their communities, such as Saudi Arabia. To every Islamic state, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents a strategic cornerstone, since it is considered the cradle of Islam. It is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques: the Holy Mosque in Makkah surrounding the Kaaba, towards which all Muslims around the world turn while performing daily prayers and even travel to if possible in order to perform the Hajj (Pilgrimage). It also has the Prophet's Holy Mosque in Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah, which contains the tomb of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Therefore, Saudi Arabia occupies an eminent position among Arab and Islamic countries on a religious level. Saudi Arabia has become the most influential country in the Arab world, since it has one-third of the oil resources outside Central Asia, China and Russia. It is the world's largest producer and exporter of oil. Discovering oil in Saudi Arabia converted it from an important country for Muslims-only to an important country for the major industrial countries and also the developing countries, as well. For various reasons, the diversity of intellectual currents can play a significant role in each community by way of cultural improvement, the development of civilization and the education of people until they become accustomed to accepting or rejecting opinions or ideas which differ from or oppose their own. In addition, the intellectual pluralism and cultural diversity can play a variety of roles. This helps promote dialogue and understanding between different groups or schools of thought. It can also develop cognitive skills, by exchanging ideas and views between different schools and intellectual currents. However, in Saudi Arabia there is much to oppose this plurality. The situation today shows that having a variety of ideologies and differences of cultures are not considered a reasonable way to develop intellectually as an individual or as a country. Rather the opposite is recommended, such that the ideologies of different groups are enough to bring out intellectual conflict and then to the segregation of society. As a consequence, extremism of thought from the different currents in Saudi Arabia has become apparent. This research is of great importance in its exploration of two significant themes. First, it highlights the Saudi Arabian background, in particular the historical, religious and social contexts, in order to understand the background of each religious or liberal movement and find the core of the intellectual differences between them. In addition, the aim of this research is to show the importance of moderation in Islamic thought in Saudi Arabia by tracing the thoughts and views of Dr Salman Al-Odah, whom he has considered to be the most important moderate thinker in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords : Saudi Arabia, intellectual movements, religious movements, extremism, moderation, Salafism, liberalism, Salman Al-Odah

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